

Vandalism is on the rise at veterans cemeteries

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WASHINGTON — Vandalism is on the rise at veterans cemeteries both in the United States and overseas, and no one really knows why.

Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., says that while many of the incidents are minor, vandals should be prosecuted because any damage in veterans cemeteries "is an assault on the honor of our veterans, particularly those who made the supreme sacrifice in defense of our nation."

The most serious incident occurred in April at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific near Honolulu, where vandals sprayed, "Let all visitors know: Hawaiians are racist," and other messages in red paint on headstones, memorial walls, flower vases and part of a U.S. flag.

At Beverly National Cemetery in Burlington County, N.J., last May, vandals tore chairs from their foundations, ripped up the entrance to a garden and pulled flags from flagpoles.

In Riverside, Calif., 128 of the 18-pound bronze memorial markers on veterans graves were stolen, along with 530 markers kept in a storage shed. The Riverside Sheriff's Department closed that case with the arrest of a 40-year-old man who sold the markers for scrap metal.

At the cemetery at Balls Bluff, Va., just outside Leesburg, the incident was more serious as relic-hunters dug up Civil War graves in search of trophies.

Both the House and Senate have passed legislation that would require the U.S. Sentencing Commission to issue guidelines to judges directing them to increase penalties for convictions of theft and vandalism at national cemeteries.

The measure would set prison terms of up to 10 years for anyone convicted of vandalism causing more than \$1,000 damage, and up to 15 years for thefts at national cemeteries. Lawmakers hope President Clinton will sign the bill into law on Veterans Day next Tuesday.

Richard Boyd, the Riverside cemetery's assistant director, said cemetery vandalism isn't prosecuted severely enough, and supports tougher penalties for desecrating cemeteries.

He recalled that when he served at the Dayton National Cemetery, three youths who toppled marble statues from their bases during an alcoholic binge were released.

"Really, they got no punishment," Boyd said. "Personally, I would like to see it a little more severe."

The Justice Department says that between Jan. 1, 1995 and May 31, 1997, there were 78 vandalism incidents reported at national cemeteries, 21 of those involving losses of more than \$1,000. In 1994, 20 cases of cemetery vandalism were reported.

Joe Purka, a spokesman for the American Battlefields Monuments Commission, said the number of incidents seems to be increasing at overseas cemeteries as well.

In Cambridge, England, thieves last year stole a gilded American eagle from a flag pole, while theft and vandalism incidents were also reported in the last year at cemeteries in the Netherlands, France and Italy.

"It's difficult to explain what's going on, but something's going on," said Phil Budahu, a spokesman for the 2.8-million-member American Legion. "Some of it involves kids who just don't know what to do with their time."



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let politicians spend the money. On the negative side, however, keeping taxes at record levels to pay off a portion of the debt probably means we will miss opportunities to both wipe out our disgraceful tax code and/or save the Social Security system from bankruptcy.

Finally, not that this should come as a surprise, politicians can choose to do all three. Indeed, this is what Republican Rep. Mark Neumann of Wisconsin is proposing. He is promoting a plan that would earmark one-third of the surplus to tax cuts, one-third to paying off debt, and one-third to new Washington spending.

Neumann's proposal is not bad, especially when compared to those in Washington who would use all the surplus for new spending. Given the serious problems that bedevil both our tax code and Social Security, however, policy makers would be wiser to use any surpluses to implement the flat tax and Social Security privatization. Then, after these two fundamental reforms are accomplished, we will better be able to afford paying off the debt.

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